

A Reflection on Shapiro's Byzantine Cupolas

From Venice to Palermo, Ravenna to Monreale, not to mention the jewel-like little church of Daphni in Greece, Nat Shapiro was fascinated and dazzled by eastern Byzantine culture with its sumptuous mosaic decorations.

Here he discovered the Byzantine cupolas; empty domes decorated with angels and saints where impassive and supreme Gods sit enthroned against a gold background. Inspired, Shapiro created his own series of domes (Figs. X-Y), concentrating and developing his creations with independence and a highly personal sense of distance. These impressions are devoid of the traditional representation of the ancient works, but full of a new visual meaning. Before Nat's vast expanses of white, we are reduced to silence, even if a few black flat tints come to punctuate and underline the voids to give these worlds their depth.

Gradually the shapes of the cupolas emerge, highly stylized and stripped of the glowing Byzantine style, evoking the calm and discreet shapes of the humble Greek domes nestled in the hollows of the mountains. The lines play with the space; at times thin, light and aerial, sometimes abundant, always organized. With fluidity, they dart, mingle, overlap, spread out, and now and then, avoid the pictorial space. They often appear with a dazzling gesture, like a straight thrust, bringing to mind Nat's speed and agility as a talented fencer.

Other times, the lines are strong and solid, in a more architectural manner, built with a wide arabesque, the dome growing dark, with a few frail touches of black marking the drama played out below. Popes and chandeliers are spiritually present, albeit at Nat's chosen distance.

The sacred is never too far away.

There, in a nutshell, is Nat Shapiro: chameleon and magician!

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Translated by Allan Wenger